

Technology Business Review

Businesses Powered By Technological Innovations 



Prof. Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Anuwar Ali
Vice Chancellor of Open University Malaysia



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Bringing education & knowledge to everyone

Introduction

Education is the base upon which a great country is built. Knowledge generation and cultivation is the essential driving factor behind not only the arts, but business, industry, and economies. It is education which Open University Malaysia (OUM) excels in delivering, and it brings it to those who would ordinarily be unable to take up learning. It is a champion of the concept of lifelong learning.

OUM arose as a private university when the Minister of Education invited a consortium of 11 Malaysian public universities, known as Multimedia Technology and Enhancement Operations Sdn. Bhd. (METEOR), to set up an open distance learning (ODL) institution. OUM was formerly launched in August 2002, by Yang Amat Berhormat Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was then the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

OUM was established, largely, to support the national educational policy of democratising education and liberalising the education industry, and in doing so to serve the national agenda of ensuring an adequate stream of workers are developed and brought into the knowledge economy.

Products and Services

At the moment OUM offers 41 academic programs in total. 7 of these

are offered at diploma level, 21 at bachelor's level, 9 at master's level, and 4 at PhD level. It is the primary aim of OUM to provide courses which are easily marketable, supported by excellent facilities for online learning, and educational opportunities for everyone.

The Malaysian Government is promoting the concept of e-University, and OUM has been identified as the

focal point of this project. Therefore OUM also supports the Government's initiative to take Malaysian academic programs overseas. OUM has undertaken, with the support of its Institute of Professional Development (IPD), international education-related projects in the Asia-Pacific region such as Sri Lanka, Republic of Maldives, Bangladesh; and managed over 360 participants from such projects so far.

*OUM celebrates 5th >>
year at 2005 open day.*

Y OUM 2005 open day.



Professor Tan Sri Datuk Dr Anuwar Ali with Yang Amat Berbahagia Datin Paduka Seri Endon Mahmood.

Blended Learning

The primary innovation of OUM is the unique blended approach to learning - where online learning, course modules, content, and face to face tutoring are combined to create a friendly and conducive environment for its learners.

In order to deliver its learning mode, OUM also developed an innovative facility - the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT) which has so far developed 59 specifically constructed printed modules to facilitate learning for the students.

Flexible Learning

The flexible delivery method of the courses available through OUM - means that everyone at anytime and anywhere could theoretically gain access to higher education in Malaysia. Furthermore, this unique learning mode is made convenient for people who also have to work - as they can be taken part time, but also allows room for breaks during the course of the academic program.



OUM hosting the 2nd Asia Co-operation Dialogue.



^ OUM Visits Korea National Open University (KNOU) to learn first hand

KNOU and OUM delegates >>

Corporate & Social Responsibility

While OUM takes part in the delivery of academic programs and various content, the other METEOR companies support it. They don't stray far from the educational sector and firmly believe that it is their mission to complement the government's need to create a very dynamic private sector in higher education. While METEOR is a consortium of 11 public universities, OUM and its associated companies under the METEOR group operate as private entities. However, being in the educational sector, they believe firmly that it is part of their social responsibility to provide quality educational services. They support the government's pledge to transform Malaysia into a fully developed nation by 2020.

Future Directions

The future will see OUM meet a number of challenges head on. They will enhance institutional research in specific areas related to open & distance learning and develop an enhanced understanding and awareness of "open learning" among Malaysians. And related to open and distance learning, they will continue



researching and developing their online learning systems in collaboration with other institutions, both in the country and internationally. Most importantly of all, they will continue to spread their academic programs to everyone who can benefit.

Conclusion

OUM's philosophy has been that of working with the public and private sectors, business and industry, and international partners where there are demonstrable mutual benefits and opportunities to improve the experiences of learners. To do so they have developed an effective vehicle for open and distance learning. As they proceed into the future, they will go on to innovate and benefit thousands more with learner-oriented academic programs which can be taken anywhere, at any pace, and at any time.

Interview with CEO, Professor Tan Sri Datuk Dr Anuwar Ali

“In Malaysia the concept of lifelong learning is still relatively new, but I think that it is a critical part of us in facing the challenge for the country to become an industrialized nation by 2020. I believe that OUM must play a significant role in providing awareness to the people at large that learning is part of our life. We have to change the people’s perception on education for all.”

- Professor Tan Sri Datuk Dr Anuwar Ali

YBhg Tan Sri, you are the Group Chief Executive Officer for METEOR and the President / Vice Chancellor of Open University Malaysia. What are the differences between the respective organizations?

The Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations Sdn. Bhd. (METEOR) was incorporated in 1998. Officially most of the activities of the organization started in 2001. Under METEOR we currently have 4 other companies - aside from Open University Malaysia (OUM) - which are active. OUM being the flagship of METEOR Group is mainly involved in providing academic programs. These academic programs range from diploma level to PhD. The other METEOR subsidiaries are:

- METEOR Learning Sdn Bhd
- METEOR Research & Consultancy Sdn Bhd
- METEOR Technology Sdn Bhd
- METEOR Doc. (which is a printing company)

These other subsidiaries complement what OUM does in terms of providing tertiary education. As the education sector is an important sector, we like to complement what the government

has been doing in this area - particularly in terms of democratising higher education.

METEOR Doc. is responsible for printing and is complementary to OUM because one of its main activities is the creation and implementation of course modules. These modules are provided for every course, particularly at the diploma and undergraduate levels.

METEOR Learning offers short courses for enhancing qualifications, which includes among others English. OUM has an Institute for Professional Development, which does various short term courses. These courses give the opportunity for a substantial number of institutions and organizations to upgrade their staff, ranging from marketing and retailing for Jaya Jusco, to courses for the Malaysian Armed Forces personnel. They allow the enhancement of qualifications to certificate level and even degree level, as well as the skills of personnel within these organizations.

METEOR Research and Consultancy overlaps in some respect with METEOR Technology and they



complement each other. The consultancy aspects of these companies are the most important. These two are involved in providing I.T. solutions to companies, the banking sector, and the government sector etc. They also perform studies for the government sector - in particular for the Ministry of Higher Education. For example, we have done studies on e-University and I.T. infrastructure of public universities. Both companies work hand in hand with the staff involved in METEOR Learning - to provide I.T. solutions with some educational content.

OUM takes part in the delivery of courses and various content and the other companies support it. We are

Efficiency and cost effectiveness is a motivational factor which drives us towards our mission and vision, which is to be the leading Institution in ODL in the country and this part of the world.

certainly very much part of the higher education sector. I believe this is part of our mission, to ensure that we complement the government's need to create a very dynamic private sector in higher education. METEOR is a consortium of 11 public universities, but OUM and others under the METEOR Group operate as private entities. So we are just like any other private company. But being educationists, it is part of our social responsibility to provide these services to the community to the best of our ability.

In terms of METEOR as a group, what are the specializations or focus areas of activities?

As I explained earlier, let me just re-emphasize that METEOR as a group, is mainly involved in the knowledge generation industry. Knowledge is so diverse, and the development of knowledge and technology is so rapid that governments have to manage it properly. The manpower resources of the nation, namely the youth and the working people, need constant upgrading in their knowledge and skills. So I think we as a group would like to believe that we play a crucial role in this.

Besides this, METEOR as a group, particularly METEOR Learning and OUM would like to reach the community in terms of supporting the nation's interest in lifelong learning. This is why our programs, both academic and training, are aimed at people who are already working. Through our academic programs, we would like people who work in the various sectors of economy to upgrade their knowledge - particularly

in terms of their ever changing work environment.

At OUM we have already established the School of Lifelong Learning (SOLL). Established in March 2005, SOLL has been busy offering various programs, mainly short term courses, to benefit the community.

The growth of OUM has been very encouraging since its first intake in 2001 (from 753 students to about more than 37,000). What do you think are the strengths leading to its current position?

As far as OUM is concerned, we have been very fortunate as we witness a substantial increase in the number of students enrolled thus far; indicating the latent public interest in educating themselves. This is particularly evident among the working population because 95% of our students are actually people who are already at work. And they come on board OUM as part-time students, hopefully enjoying their learning process while still actively involved in their daily work.

This is the beginning of our new 2006 semester in January, and by now our student enrollment figures would have increased to almost 38,000. So this is indeed an encouraging scenario for us at OUM. It tells us that a lot of people out there, who did not have the opportunity before, do want to pursue their studies to obtain a degree or diploma.

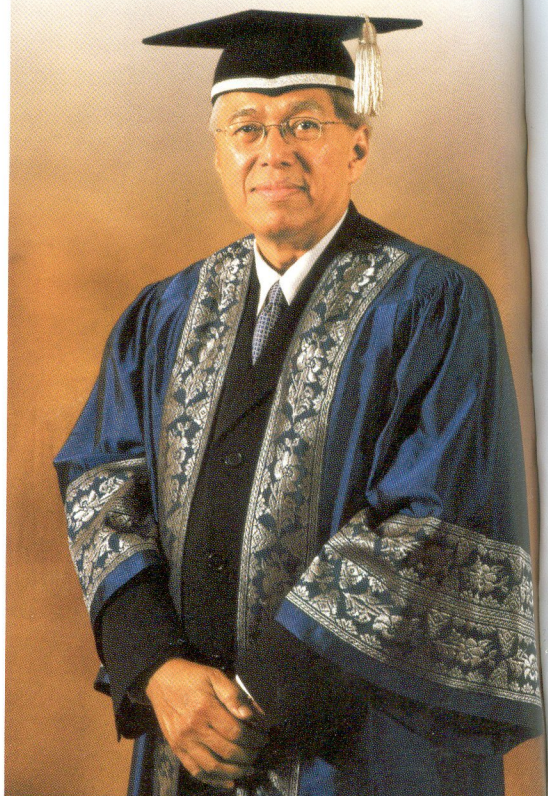
The strength we have at OUM is based on a number of factors.

Firstly - as a private higher education institution, we have to get the approval

of the National Accreditation Board or Lembaga Akreditasi Negara, for all our academic programs. This in itself is a recognition by the authority concerned that our programs are structured to meet the needs of the students - at whatever level. Then we have to go through the process of getting accreditation for all these programs. After each approval their panel of experts will come to assess and monitor us, examine the suitability of the programs and then our learning facilities. Only then, will they give us the accreditation. That to us is very important.

Secondly - we have the advantage of utilizing the academic staff or lecturers, who are mainly from the public sector universities, and who are our owners in a certain sense since they come from the consortium of 11 public universities. We deliver our programs by utilizing the expertise of these academic staff, as well as lecturers from other public and private higher education institutions.

There are now about 4,000 of these lecturers who form the bulk of OUM tutors; and we utilize 1000 or so at any particular point in time. They are our



key resource; if we have a subject to deliver to the students, then we select the tutors on a part time basis. This is the interactive tutorial component of our learning delivery system.

Thirdly - we have a very flexible system which allows all our students to finish their degree program within 8 years or diploma program within 6 years. So within that time frame, they can still take the qualification. It is flexible in that time frame to suit the needs of part time students. Especially for those who are also working, they may find it hard to do both and subsequently need breaks to suit their learning style.

Fourthly - as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution, we would like to reach the community in every part of the country. In all the states we have learning centers, 36 in total all over the country. So this is indeed an opportunity for the people in Sabah, Sarawak, Kedah, and the East Coast states or any other states to have a learning centre near to their workplace or residence.

To support all these learning centers, we ensure that our I.T. facilities are all up to date. This enables a student working from home to gain access to references, resources and our digital library, which I believe is one of the best in the country. This is an important resource for them - so that, wherever they are, at any time of the day they can access everything via the internet or OUM website. It is very unique and we are moving away from the traditional campus orientated approach.

I believe in the years to come, an increasing number of students will go through this updated e-learning mode of acquiring knowledge or information as we can witness in the more developed countries. Even in the traditional campus environment, e-learning will become an important factor, and I think rightly so.



Launch of OUM 'Lifelong Learning' programmes in Negeri Sembilan.

What are the programmes offered by OUM?

At the moment we have 41 academic programs; 7 at the diploma level, 21 at the bachelors level, 9 at masters level, and 4 at PhD level.

Because the majority of our students are part timers we cannot as yet have the so called professional courses or programs like engineering or medicine; neither can we have courses which rely heavily on lab work or experiments. As a result, all our courses are geared towards helping our students learn and understand by having facilities that are different from the traditional campus universities.

How would you explain about the blended learning approach adopted by OUM?

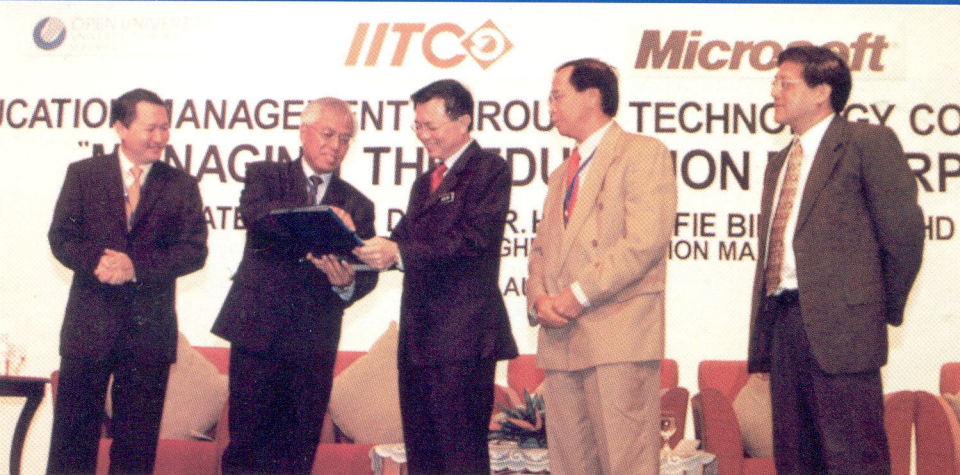
Our guiding principle is to be as flexible as possible - so that the students can learn; at any time, at any pace and anywhere. In line with this we have what we call a blended learning approach. There are three components to this:

One is self-study. Every course must be accompanied by a printed module. These modules are written by Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) whom we acquire from various universities and are people who are well versed

in a particular discipline. They endeavour to create modules, which will be very friendly for the students. Because the students are working people who have left formal education for a long time - when they read the module, understanding the content must be made easy, and it must encourage them to carry on reading. Otherwise some students will just give up - and their interest in pursuing the course might be jeopardized. So we always stress on the quality of the modules. In turn the students must work through the modules on their own initiative.

We also have face-to-face tutorials. For every subject we offer, we have 10 hours of face-to-face tutorial; 5 times in the semester, 2 hours each. During these sessions our tutors will interact with our learners. Both students and tutors have to follow the structure which is given in the module. The students have to refer to the guide and read before they come to their tutorials, or otherwise they miss out. The learners must read the module first so that the tutor can enhance their understanding of the subject matter.

Our interactive mode of learning is not confined only to face-to-face tutorials; the students can communicate with their respective tutors or the staff of the faculty at OUM, via the internet, to ask questions. This places the



The Education Management through Technology Conference 2005 Jointly organized by OUM and INTI Information Technology Centre (IITC).

burden very much on the tutor; the tutor has to know the subject very well, because he or she has to respond in writing.

The last facet to complement these is online learning. We use a system called MyLMS (Learner Management System). Through this system, developed by OUM, the students communicate with their tutors, colleagues and with the university management.

We want to encourage the students to enjoy their learning process. Through OUM's website we have a Learner's Connection where we encourage the students to communicate to others their experiences, in terms of learning through our open and blended approach.

We also have a Tutor's Connection, because familiarity with this new approach to education in our country is still at an early stage. The tutors themselves come from traditional campus universities - they are used to working in a campus environment using face-to-face approach. Whereas here, physically there are no students in the campus as in the normal universities - they generally don't come and we don't see them. The tutors have to be given a special kind of training by OUM staff, so that they may learn how to interact with the students and how to teach them in the ODL environment. These

are important ingredients in Open Learning.

Why do you think ODL is going to be the most popular mode of training obtaining a tertiary qualification?

I don't think it's the most popular yet, but certainly in a country like Malaysia where the chances of getting directly into a university are much less than those in developed countries, it is a good option. At the current rate, only 25% of our school leavers will ever get the chance to join the university and get a degree. So the opportunity for school leavers is limited in that sense. In a developed country it would reach 40% - 50% some even 60%.

By having this ODL I believe we can reach the community and in particular those people who missed out maybe 5 to 10 years ago because of the lack of opportunity so that by now they will have the chance to pursue their education. For example, we are in collaboration with the Ministry of Education to give more opportunities for existing teachers, who do not have a degree - to come on board with us and do their degree in education-related fields.

Right now we have over 16,000 teachers from the education sector as our students. But of course we also cater for those in the banking sector,

government agencies, police personnel, even pensioners. Our oldest student from Sarawak is 65 years old and is doing a degree course. We would like to have more of these people, who make learning an important part of their every day life. I'm not so sure if it is the most popular vehicle for higher education, but in the years to come, I strongly believe that it will become a conduit for more people to enhance their education and better their qualifications.

What are the quality assurance considerations applied at OUM?

Now, there are a few things which we do actually. One is to ensure that quality is uppermost in our delivery. We have many internal processes which we enhance continuously. We make sure that the quality of OUM modules are always improved and enhanced. To this end we make corrections, new amendments and edit the modules - so that they are friendlier for the students.

Secondly, part of the internal processes include tutor training. The tutors who come on board with us are part timers and need training because this is a new mode of delivery for them. Thus, as earlier mentioned, tutor training at OUM is an integral component of our quality enhancement.

E-learning is also an important aspect of quality considerations. We always ensure whatever knowledge we transmit can be absorbed by the student. To this end, we have what we call the Centre for Instructional Design & Technology (CIDT) which is equipped with roughly 45 instructional designers, graphic designers, and various qualified IT related personnel - who develop and diligently improve the modules. This is part of our internal system so that the learning process will become very acceptable to our students and conducive to their learning environment.

To supplement all this, we also try to acquire ISO status for a number of our operational units or departments. Up to now, we already have three ISO 9001 - 2000 certificates for our Admissions Unit, our Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Digital Library and the Centre for Instructional Design & Technology.

Lastly we are subjected to the rules and regulations of the National Accreditation Board. They come and check from time to time to ensure that the delivery of courses is of acceptable quality, our tutors and academic staff are qualified, and our premises and infrastructure are of acceptable standards. Having an independent body performing checks like this is important.

We also have independent outside assessors, who come in and deliberate on our academic programs. These independent people, who give inputs and ideas into our academic activities, are an important part of OUM's desire to improve our delivery mechanism.

What are the challenges faced by OUM?

One of the things which we emphasize at OUM is the retention of as many students as possible. This is a big challenge for us because like any ODL institution all over the world, the number of students will drop off during the process of their learning. With open learning, a 40% - 50% rate would be expected. So to us, retaining students to the end so that they will obtain their qualifications is essential. We are very glad to say that our depreciation is at most 30% - depending on the course. Because we are new - there is still a lot of interest and we are taking various steps to ensure that the students are retained.

The second step we emphasise is to have quality delivery within our

modules, our tutors and our e-learning infrastructure. When the students come out our system, when they graduate they should feel that they got a good education at the end of the day. And this is what we want to provide. By providing this, the learning process can become very enjoyable to our students.

Thirdly - the challenge for us is to enhance research in the areas that are crucial to our growth as an educational institution. We have a unit which works on this. Open learning is new to Malaysia and understanding of its concept has not been as wide as it should be, so research on this aspect will be beneficial to the country. To me, research is a challenge as we have to allocate funds to research, and being solely dependant on our revenue, I think we have to ensure that any research we do is certainly beneficial to OUM.

Fourth - the challenge for us is to generate more market-oriented activities. Going outside of OUM slightly, the sister companies can expand their activities in terms of training and providing I.T. services outside OUM by utilizing its good name.

Last but not least, in Malaysia the concept of lifelong learning is still relatively new, but I think that it is part of us in facing the challenge for the country to become an industrialized nation by 2020. I believe that OUM must play a significant role in providing awareness to the people at large that learning is part of our life. We have to change the people's perception on education.

What do you think the outlook for the education sector will be for 2006, especially from the open and distance learning (ODL) perspective?

I think judging by the trends of the past few years I am very optimistic

about the future of higher education. Particularly with the awareness that we have among our population about the need to enhance their knowledge as well as their qualifications. As I said earlier, we at OUM as a provider of open and distance education, feel that we can reach more of our population as we try to make inroads into as many areas outside of the more developed and advantaged areas.

I am glad to say, for instance, that there is a lot of interest in Sabah, Sarawak, and the East Coast states for people to continue their education via ODL. Why I say Sarawak and Sabah are important; it is because there is an urge within the community to make up for lost time and lost opportunities.

So with our new academic programs and improved coverage - I am very optimistic for the year 2006.

There are other subsidiaries in the METEOR group that are also involved in the training and development sector, not far from education. What do they offer?

The other subsidiaries emphasize training, as part of overall education and skill development and enhancement. For example, METEOR Learning offers a number of training and development programs leading to skill enhancement for groups such as the armed forces and various other agencies we deal with.

Now that the government is promoting the use of English, we have been doing well in promoting our English programs and we have special English programs for the public and private sectors. For this purpose, we have established InCEL or the International Centre for English Language under METEOR Learning Sdn. Bhd.

As far as METEOR Research & Consultancy is concerned, apart from IT solutions, we also offer special

certificate programmes. One of them we just started in October 2005 is called the 'Malaysian information technology and Professional Examination' which we do in collaboration with the Malaysian Examinations Council. This is in line with many other South East Asian countries where we offer professional certification programs to test competencies within the IT sector. We wish to get the message across to employers and industries - to accept this competency verification so that the IT Industry in this country can develop further.

If the education sector is challenging for OUM, how is the training sector perceived by the other subsidiaries in the METEOR group?

I think the challenges for the other subsidiaries are equally daunting because to me there are many players who are into training, whether in IT, whether English, and other related development programs, upgrading of managers and so on. I strongly feel that we can use OUM as an important leverage because of the academic credentials which we have. Particularly, the approval and accreditation by the National Accreditation Board for all academic courses is an advantage.

Secondly we are utilizing a lot of expertise and academic experience from the universities in the country to assist us. So likewise the METEOR subsidiaries are also well placed in this respect.

Nevertheless one of the things we must do well is to extensively market our name and our educational products because we are very new. I believe that persistent and effective marketing and advertisement initiatives would go a long way towards meeting our objectives. The METEOR group and all METEOR subsidiaries are playing a part here.

What would you like to say about METEOR group in conclusion?

Let me say this as the CEO of the METEOR group and also as the Vice Chancellor of OUM. I would like to believe that we are utilizing all of our staff in a very dynamic way. We are actually very lean in the sense that we try to maximize the utilization of our present full time staff and we do not recruit personnel in a big way.

Efficiency and cost effectiveness is a motivational factor which drives us towards our mission and vision, which is to be the leading institution in ODL in the country and this part of the world.

I also believe that by utilizing our very lean staff, we are focused in our activities, and have a shared work ethic which has been cultivated among our staff. We see that the education sector, especially higher education, has so many players; and in such a competitive environment we have little choice but to provide the best service and quality education to all.

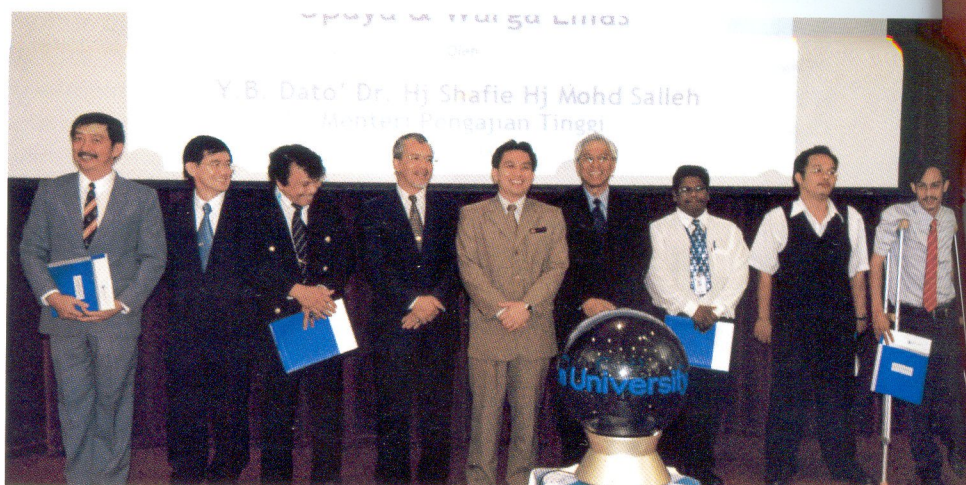
The other aspect which I want to mention is that we are constantly upgrading our capability in the design and development of academic programs. These academic programs must always be in tune with the needs

of the students and the demands of the market place.

If the students feel that our program does not suit their needs, then I think we will lose out to other education providers. So in that sense we must very closely monitor the needs of industry and the needs of employers in this country.

Lastly, being in the education sector we believe in cooperation and creating positive working relationships with other similar education or training related organizations. And this is the key to a better future in the higher education sector. Collaboration and synergy, in which we aim to share our resources in terms of teaching, content development, research, infrastructure and IT sharing, staff, are certainly beneficial to all parties. For example, OUM is willing to give access to our digital library facilities, or our online facilities. This sort of collaboration will in turn benefit all our university students nationwide and in the process will also enable us to improve our nation's IT and learning capability.

For Open University Malaysia, we hope that 2006 will be a good year during which we hope to have greater reach to the Malaysian people so that many more students, including working adults, will join our academic programs.



Launching ceremony for The Partial Study Fee Exemption Scheme for Senior Citizens and Disabled Persons.